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THE GESTURE OF AFFIRMATION AMONG THE ARABS¹

By S. S. GEORGE

Modern theories of language assert that, at the very beginning, speech was gesture; the essential thing about primordial speech is not the sound but the movement. It is sometimes urged, against such theories, that different peoples use opposite gestures to express the same meaning. It is thus remarked that the modern Arabs, in affirmation, shake the head as we ordinarily do in negation. Wundt² quotes this observation, and tries to account for the contradiction by suggesting that the gesture may have some relatively recent and unknown origin. Goldziher,³ on the other hand, cites discrepancies of this sort as proof of the lack of any necessary inner connection between meaning and gesture.

Wundt gives Goldziher as his authority; and Goldziher, in turn, refers to Petermann. The latter⁴ is apparently responsible for the observation in question. It is my purpose here to examine the gestures of affirmation and negation among the Arabs, and to ascertain whether Petermann's observation, and the consequent discrepancy, are true to fact.

The first thing to notice is that the Arabs, according to their early traditions, at the time of the prophet expressed affirmation exactly as we do at present. Negation was manifested by a lift of the head upward, and affirmation by a drop downward and forward. The following is an incident which Goldziher also cites: "Asma, the daughter of Abu Bekr, relates, 'I came once to Aisha, on an occasion of a solar eclipse, and as she was in her prayers I spoke to her: "What makes the people so disturbed and terrified?" She pointed to the sky above. "Is this a true sign of God?" I asked her. She made a movement with her head (*harraka*) affirming.'" But while in this case we are not told what the movement was, the following anecdote gives us definite information. "There went on the streets of Medina once a maid, ornamented with

¹ From the Psychological Seminary of Cornell University.

² W. Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie*, I, 1st part, 1904, 180.

³ I. Goldziher, *Zeitschr. für Völkerpsychol.*, xvi., 1885-6, 377.

⁴ H. Petermann, *Reisen im Orient*, I, 1860, 172.

earrings. A Jew threw a stone and struck the maiden dead. As she was still able to breathe, they brought her to the Prophet. The Prophet spoke to her: 'Did so-and-so kill you?' She lifted her head up (signifying a negation). The Prophet repeated the question with reference to some other person. She made the same movement (of denial). With a third trial, however, she moved her head downward (*shafadat*, i. e., affirming). On the strength of this the Prophet passed a death-judgment on the man concerned."

The etymology of the word 'negation' in Arabic is indicative in this connection. Negation or 'selb,' according to Muheet al Muheet, originally meant taking a thing (snatching it) unawares and with rapidity. Also to 'salaba' the sword, from the same root, means to unsheathe it; this is strongly suggestive of a movement upward. Similar correspondences are apparent in the case of 'affirmation.' 'Ijab' or affirmation is from the same root as 'to bring forth' (forward). The word 'kafada,' to bend forward, is used in two opposite senses. The Arabs say "the days have come down with me from a high place to a bent or low place (*kafd*)". They also say 'aysh kafd,' 'bent life,' to express a life of ease and luxury, in the opposite sense. Albustani, a great Arabian lexicographer who lived in the past century, commenting on this usage, says: "This is here used in the sense of acceptable life, because 'acceptable' (*merdieh*) is of the same meaning as *kafada* or bend forward." As occurs often in the Arabian Nights, the usual way of answering the command of a superior is by exclaiming, "Sam'an wa ta'at," which is equivalent to "to hear is to obey." (*Ta'at* is really more than to obey; it is also 'to do homage to,' usually expressed by a bending forward of the whole body, not only of the head.) These examples show that the Arabian traditions as regards the expression of affirmation and negation are fully in line with the procedure of other nations, and that their language is interwoven with references to such expression, whether in an etymological or in a purely idiomatic sense.

Did the modern Arabs forget these traditions and change the gesture of affirmation? To one acquainted with Mohammedan traditions and the tenacity with which they are adhered to such a change must seem extremely improbable. The literature of the modern Arabs, until very recently, is in great measure the old classical literature. Modern Arabs who read at all, if they do not themselves use the gestures in the same way as of old, must at least understand their import. To confirm these suspicions, however, I wrote to two authori-

ties on modern Arabian usage, Professor R. Gottheil and Dr. Philip Hitti, both of the Semitic Department of Columbia University. Dr. Hitti is himself a Syrian scholar, formerly of Beirut; Professor Gottheil has travelled extensively in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Professor Gottheil writes: "I have never in my travels in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, seen anything that would lead me to believe that the Arabs used the gestures in reverse order. I have asked Mrs. Gottheil, who is herself a native of Syria, and she tells me that the gestures there are exactly similar to our gestures in the West." Dr. Hitti confirms these statements.

As I have said before, the source of the alleged change of the affirmative gesture is Petermann's *Reisen im Orient*. Petermann does not dwell on the observation; he merely notes the fact in a passing remark. Remarks of this sort need not be taken very seriously, since Petermann is looking for 'incomparabilities' between Eastern and Western usages: a characteristic habit of the early travelers. What Petermann really observed was, probably, a very different thing from what he reported. I have myself observed among the modern Arabs sidewise movements of the head accompanying the expression of affirmation. The Arabic language is very susceptible to rhythmical intonation; and the Arabs indulge in sidewise harmonic motions on occasions which might at first seem incompatible, and to a Westerner quite incomprehensible. With their intonation in reading the Koran, the Mohammedans make slight movements of the body either forward and backward or from side to side. Again, such sidewise movements of the head or body are made on occasions of 'tarab' or pleasure-feeling. The Arabs say, 'ihtazza taraban,' shook with pleasure; or more often 'tamayela taraban,' rather in the sense of a slow and regular movement from the one side to the other. 'Tarab' itself in its origin means 'movement,' and also a movement of a rhythmical character (*cf.* Lisan Al-Arab, II, 45, 46). Other occasions when the Arabs perform sidewise movements of body or head are the occasions of 'hamasa'; these are occasions of pride, of self-exaltation, the sort of feeling one gets when engaged in 'great doings.' *Hamasa* is allied to *tarab*, but differs from it in being more nearly related to action, either preparatory to great actions, or accompanying them. It is thus interwoven with a 'warming up' pride. When a hero challenges another on the battlefield, he often recites certain 'hamasat' which, besides tending to overawe his opponent, also have the effect of warming him up to the highest pitch for the forthcoming death struggle

(*cf.* Romance of Antar or Alzeer for numerous instances). The same movements occur in 'nekwa,' something like 'rising to the occasion' when called upon to act, a manifestation of chivalry. Such movements may also be clearly observed in 'waeed,' or threatening, when the speaker is aware that the execution of the threat will not take place immediately.

All these cases, it should be noticed, are related to one another. They all center on feelings of activity, pride of execution, or set determination. It is, after all, not strange that movements of this kind should be made in expressing affirmation. Any of the feelings mentioned might be present when an Arab affirms, and he might shake his head or body accordingly. Yet these movements, it need hardly be pointed out, differ from those made when a negation is to be expressed. In the first place, they are not so violent as in negation; the whole body, too, tends to be involved in the movement. The gesture of negation is accomplished by a more or less restricted movement of the face, the neck tending to remain stationary; in these other movements it is the head that moves, and the head and the neck are thrown alternately now to the one side, now to the other.

It is thus probable that what Petermann observed, and supposed to be a gesture of affirmation, was nothing more than a gesture expressing some such feeling as determination, pride of execution, or rising to the occasion. A closer observer, or one better acquainted with Arabian usages, would not think of connecting such movements with affirmation in itself, though they might well be made along with affirmation. Petermann's observation thus seems to be one of the many instances where a superficial and unscientific observation forces itself upon scientific men, and causes them not a little confusion.